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Stout

Things and Sensations

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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

Things and Sensations

By

G. F. Stout

Fellow of the Academy

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THINGS AND SENSATIONS

BY G. F. STOUT

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

Read, May 31, 1905.

1. THE PROBLEM, NEGATIVELY DETERMINED.

THE philosopher cannot legitimately raise the question—Does matter exist? He can only start like other people on the basis of ordinary experience; but the existence of a material world is a constant and essential presupposition of all ordinary thought and conduct. Thus, philosophical inquiry can relate only to the nature of matter and of our knowledge of it, not to its existence. We may not ask—Is there an external world? but we may ask—*What* is the external world, and how do we know it? Yet, even in this direction, our inquiry is limited by definite conditions. Philosophical theory concerning the nature of matter is bound to include and explain those characteristics of matter which are essentially presupposed in the ordinary procedure of common-sense and physical science.

Philosophical problems of this kind must be such as arise inevitably out of the organized body of pre-philosophical knowledge. In the present paper I propose to deal with such a problem, that of the connexion of material things with what we call their appearance to the senses.

2. THE PROBLEM, POSITIVELY STATED.

If we cross-examine common-sense and science on this topic, we obtain two results which, taken as they stand, are in apparent conflict with each other. From one point of view, things and their sensible appearances coalesce in indivisible unity. From another point of view, the sensible appearances have an existence and history separate from the existence and history of the things. The problem is to harmonize these apparently conflicting views while doing justice to both.

3. UNITY OF THING AND SENSIBLE APPEARANCE.

In ordinary perception, we do not, in general, make any distinction between the thing perceived and its sensible appearance. When we see a table, we seem to have cognizance only of the table itself; we

are not also aware of something else which we call the visual presentation of the table. It is only through critical reflection that we are enabled to distinguish the visual presentation from the table itself. And even when we do recognize the distinction, we are still unable to separate mentally thing and sensible appearance so as to set them side by side as mutually exclusive entities. They still continue to be blended in inseparable unity, and the distinction between them is only a distinction within this unity.

If we turn from actual perception to ideal representation, we obtain the same result. Our ideas and concepts of material things and processes owe all their specific content to sense-presentations. Their nature is determined for thought only in terms of qualities and relations belonging to visual, tactual, and other sensations. The extension of matter, for example, has no meaning for us apart from our experience of the extensiveness of visual and tactual sensations. Similarly the motion of material things has no meaning apart from our experience of the displacement of visual sensations within the general field of visual sensation, or of tactual sensations within the general field of tactual sensation.

We may then conclude that, both for perception and ideal representation, matter and its sensible appearance form an inseparable unity. We cannot think away what belongs to the sensible appearance without thinking away matter itself.

4. SEPARATE EXISTENCE OF THINGS AND THEIR SENSIBLE APPEARANCE.

None the less, however intimate the unity of matter and sensible appearance, the existence of the one is not numerically identical with the existence of the other. On the contrary, we are compelled by overwhelming evidence to recognize that, in this respect, they are relatively separate and independent. The visual appearance of a thing may vary indefinitely in size, shape and colour, without any corresponding variation in the thing itself. Similarly, when we see a thing moving, the displacement of the visual presentation within the field of view is more or less rapid according to the varying distance of the thing seen. But the thing seen does not, on that account, move more or less rapidly. Now if X exhibits changes and variations which are not shared by Y , X and Y must be distinct existences. And this argument holds good for all other senses as well as for sight. Physiology here supplies us with a general formula. The variable nature of sense-experience corresponds immediately not with the constitution and changes of the material world in general, but only with the constitution

and changes of the small fragment of matter which we call a nervous system. Alter this, let us say, by the use of drugs, and the sensible appearance of perceived things may be profoundly modified without any corresponding alteration in the things themselves.

We reach the same result by considering the connexion of sensations with mental images. Plainly the existence of mental images is distinct from the existence of bodily things. Their waxing and waning in distinctness, their changes of quality, their coming and going, &c., are occurrences that cannot be identified with events happening in the external world. But sensations are continuous in their existence and history with images. They are continuously connected with them through such intermediate links as after-images and primary memory-images, and the varying grades of hallucination. Hence, sensations must also have an existence distinct from that of external objects.

The same conclusion is forced upon us by the private and incommunicable nature of sensations. When *A* and *B* perceive one and the same material thing, the sensations experienced by *A*, however much they may resemble *B*'s sensations, have, none the less, a separate existence from *B*'s sensations. There is only one perceived thing; but its sensible appearance is not correspondingly single; hence, the sensible appearance presented to *A*, and that presented to *B* must not only be numerically distinct from each other, but also from the thing perceived.

For these reasons we seem bound to accept the position that the existence of sensible appearance is distinct from the existence of the things which present these appearances. But, on the other hand, we seem equally bound to recognize that the sensible appearance as such is fused in inseparable unity with the thing. Our problem is to reconcile these two views. And there seems only one course to follow. We must inquire into the nature of the connexion between sensation and thing, on account of which the sensation is called the sensible appearance of the thing—the appearance of the thing to the senses. What does the word ‘appearance’ mean in this context?

5. THE SENSIBLE APPEARANCE, NOT MERELY THE THING ITSELF APPEARING.

At this point, it is necessary to consider a certain way of answering this question, which, if it were true, would imply that the question itself arises out of mere confusion of thought. I have proceeded on the assumption that the sensible appearance is itself something which

appears or is known, and I have contended that this something has an existence distinct from the material thing perceived. Now a critic may here accuse me of a twofold error. He may say:—

In affirming the distinct existence of thing and sensible appearance, you confuse appearance in the sense of what appears or is perceived with appearance in the sense in which it merely means the fact of appearing or becoming perceived. On the other hand, if you insist on meaning by appearance something which appears, you are wrong in asserting the distinct existence of material thing and sensible appearance. The distinction is not a distinction between two existences. It is a distinction between the material thing as known in a relatively fragmentary and erroneous way with the same thing as known more fully and correctly.

The points raised in this hypothetical criticism are of the utmost importance. Unless we come to clear understanding in regard to them the problem we are discussing will be affected with fatal ambiguity, precluding the possibility of a satisfactory solution.

What lends plausibility to the criticism is simply its vagueness and generality. It breaks down when we bring it to the test of facts by examining simple instances of the distinction between sensible appearance and material thing. I look at a candle flame, and, in doing so, I press against my right eyeball so as to displace it; immediately I become aware of two visual appearances instead of one. One of the visual presentations dances up and down as I move my eyeball while the other remains at rest. Now it is plainly nonsense to say that what I call the doubleness of the visual appearance simply means that I perceive the single candle twice, or that it appears to me twice. What I am aware of is two separate objects, one of which moves while the other is unmoved. The case is not comparable to my recognizing that $2+2=4$ to-day, and again recognizing the same truth to-morrow. I am aware of two actual existences each with its own positive nature; I am not merely aware of the same existence twice over. Again it is nonsense to say that the doubled visual appearance is the candle-flame itself as imperfectly apprehended by me. On this view the imperfect apprehension must involve a positive error. For the imperfection would consist in apprehending as two what is really one. But in fact there is no such misapprehension. I know quite well that there is only a single candle-flame, and yet the two visual appearances persist unaffected by this knowledge. But a mistake vanishes when it is corrected. The doubleness of the visual appearance is, therefore, an actual fact and not an error or illusion.

Consider, next, the visual appearance of the full moon as seen from the earth's surface. This is certainly not a mere appearing but something which appears—a silvery patch with a perfectly determinate

shape and magnitude. Are we then to say that this something which appears is just the moon itself as imperfectly apprehended? It is certainly true that merely looking at the moon gives us a very imperfect and erroneous notion of it. A child, for instance, may take it to have a flat surface about as big as an ordinary dinner-plate. But when this impression is rectified by full astronomical knowledge, the visual appearance, as such, remains just as it was before. It still, for example, has a determinate magnitude which can be by no means identified with the magnitude of the moon, either as rightly or as wrongly apprehended. The identification is impossible, not because the visual magnitude is smaller than that of the moon, for this is really a meaningless statement; the identification is impossible because the two magnitudes are, in principle, incapable of being compared. The visual appearance of the moon cannot be compared as regards its magnitude either with the moon itself, or with any other material thing. It can only be compared with other visual appearances as such. It is nonsense to say that it is as big as a plate or a half-crown. But it may be quite true that it is as big as the visual appearance of the plate when the plate is a certain distance from the eye, and it may be at the same time equally true that it is as big as the visual appearance of a half-crown, when the half-crown is at a certain distance from the eye. When compared with other visual appearances it has a quite definite and definitely measurable magnitude. It occupies a determinate portion of the total field of visual sensation. It may itself be used as a unit of measurement: thus Helmholtz estimates that the portion of the field of visual sensation which would correspond to the blind spot is equal to many full moons. Now, if this extensive magnitude of visual appearance is not even comparable with the extensive magnitude of material things, it cannot be identified with the extensive magnitude of material things, however imperfectly or erroneously apprehended.

Arguments of this type seem fully to justify us in regarding sensible appearances as having an existence and a positive nature of their own, distinct from material things and their attributes, however imperfectly and erroneously these may be apprehended. The sensible appearance is itself something that appears, and this something is not matter; it is not even matter appearing in a fragmentary and distorted way.

We have then stated our problem accurately in making it a question of the relation of two distinct existences. What we have to discover is how it is that that one of these existences—the sensible appearance—so interpenetrates the other—the material thing—that apart from it there would be no material thing.

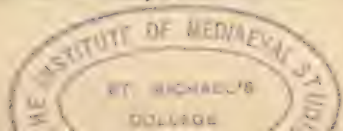
6. THE INDEPENDENT NOT-SELF.

The first attempt to solve this problem, in modern times, is best represented by Locke. It consists in regarding sensible appearance as representing the material world as a reflection in a mirror represents the reflected surface. All that we directly know is, not matter itself, but an image or copy of it. And this image or copy of it is not even accurate. It is intermixed with elements which do not resemble any attributes of matter. Such elements are sensible colour, heat, odour, sound and the like. On the other hand, extension and motion are really properties of matter; but we do not in any ordinary sense of the words perceive them or directly know them. We only perceive certain qualities of our sensations which resemble them. This doctrine is obviously indefensible. It makes impossible the knowledge which we actually possess of material things. If it were true, we should never even be able to compare the nature of matter with the nature of sensible appearance, so as to judge of their resemblance or difference.

Another and a widely diffused type of theory arises from acceptance of one of the propositions on which the Lockian doctrine is founded, together with the rejection of the other. The proposition that we directly and positively know only sensible appearance is accepted. The proposition that we do not know matter directly and positively is rejected. But if matter is directly or positively known, and if all that we directly and positively know is sensible appearance, it follows that matter and its sensible appearance must be identical. This is the doctrine maintained in its purest form by Berkeley and Mill, and also, though with very important modifications, by many writers who draw their inspiration from Kant. What is essential to it is the assertion that actual existence belongs not to matter in any sense in which it can be distinguished from sensation, but only to sensations as they come and go in individual experience. The ordinary distinction between thing and sensation becomes, on this view, a distinction between sensations actually experienced and a systematic order which comprehends not only actual but possible sense-experience. Thus the material world, so far as it is distinguishable from sensible appearance, consists, according to this doctrine, in unrealised possibilities. There are two fatal objections to such theories. In the first place, the material world, as essentially presupposed in the procedure of common-sense and science, is not a system of possibilities, but of actual existences, persisting, changing and acting on each other. In the second place,

the supposed fixed and uniform order of possible sensations is a fiction, if it be regarded as belonging to sensations as such, apart from a material world, assumed to exist independently of the sensations, and in particular a sentient organism interacting with a material environment. This last objection is evaded by remodelling the theory on Kantian lines. The distinction between matter and sensible appearance is then drawn in a different way. Matter is regarded as an ideal construction for which the material is supplied by the content of sense-presentation. But the construction takes place according to certain universal principles or rules of synthesis, which determine connexions quite independent of the coming and going of actual or even of possible sensations in individual experience. Such principles are those of Causality, Substance and Reciprocity, as formulated by Kant. The content of sense-experience, elaborated according to such rules of combination, yields an order which is objective in the sense that it is independent of the vicissitudes of the private history of any individual mind. This doctrine has certainly great advantages as compared with Berkeley's or Mill's. It shows how and why the nature of sensible appearance so interpenetrates the nature of matter that apart from sensible appearance there would be for us no matter. So far, the Kantian seems to me to stand on solid ground. On the other hand he is also successful in showing that in his view the being of matter must be distinct from and relatively independent of the being of sensible appearance. But, as regards this second point, the explanation offered appears to me to be defective. It is defective because the *kind* of being which it ascribes to matter is not the kind of being which belongs to matter as we know it. Matter as we know it is an actual existence, enduring, changing, acting, and being acted on. It cannot, therefore, be a conceptual order in which content is divorced from existence. It is absurd to suppose that the mathematician may awake some morning and find that his perfect fluid has become viscous during the night. Similarly, if my fire is merely an ideal construction, using the content of sensation as its material, it is nonsensical to suppose that leaving it burning brightly I can return and find that it has gone out.

Plainly Kant's own unknowable thing, *per se*, can be of no use here. What we require is a system of actual existences which are at least known as enduring, changing and interacting, and known as connected in the most intimate way with our sense-experience. Matter can only be constituted by the qualification of such actual existences by the content of sensible appearance. This, no doubt, involves, even from the outset, a process which, in a wide sense of the



term, may be called 'ideal construction.' But the construction must be a *construing*—a construing in terms of sensation of the nature and behaviour of an actual existence other than sensation or any immediate experiences of the individual.

Let us call this actual existence the independent not-self.

7. THE INDEPENDENT NOT-SELF IS NOT UNKNOWABLE.

At this point we reach a critical stage in our inquiry. We are confronted by the question—'How is the independent not-self in the first instance known?' How, indeed, can it be known since it confessedly transcends experience?

I reply that it does not transcend experience in any sense which could make it unknowable. It does, indeed, transcend purely immediate experience. But purely immediate experience is transcended in all knowledge, even in the knowledge of sensations and of subjective states.

By purely immediate experience I mean such experience as we have of a toothache, in so far as at any moment it is actually being felt, or of a sound, in so far as at any moment it is actually being heard. Past toothaches or past phases in the history of the same toothache may indeed be known; but they are not immediately experienced at the moment in which they are known. Immediate experiences in this sense are cognate accusatives after the verb 'to experience.' In this sense we speak of experiencing a toothache as we speak of jumping a jump. To experience a toothache is to experience a certain kind of experience. Such immediacy does not include any distinction of subject and object. The experiencing is distinguished from the content experienced only as colour in general is distinguished from this or that special colour.

In this strict sense of immediacy, being immediately experienced is not the same as being known. On the contrary, it would seem that purely immediate experience neither does nor can *by itself* constitute an object of knowledge. The toothache which I know is not merely the momentary phase of it which I am immediately feeling; it also embraces past phases which I am not immediately feeling. It is known to me, for example, as having duration, and as having changed in intensity and otherwise. The immediate experience is known only as related to what at the moment is not immediately experienced. Otherwise, there would be no distinction of subject and object, and consequently no knowledge. On the other hand, the constituents of the known object which are not immediately experienced are known only through their relatedness to immediate

experience. Ultimately it is immediate experience which determines and specifies them for thought. Immediate experience, being essentially fragmentary, points beyond it, so that in knowing it we *ipso facto* know that to which it is related. And the relation must in each case have a specific character implied in the specific nature of the immediate experience.

From this point of view, it is convenient to speak of the immediate experience as 'representing' or 'standing for' what is not immediately experienced. But representation in this sense must be carefully distinguished from representation which presupposes a previous independent knowledge of what is represented, and an examination of its relation to that which we regard as representing it. A memory-image does not represent what is remembered as a photograph represents a person. We are not enabled to remember by first ascertaining that the memory-image is representative. On the contrary, it is only because we have already remembered by means of it that we are justified in regarding it as representative.

The distinction between purely immediate experience and what it implies is a distinction which is drawn only by reflective analysis. For ordinary unreflective consciousness the two coalesce in distinctionless unity. In listening to a sound—e.g. a crescendo or diminuendo note—I do not, explicitly, discriminate the phase of the sound which is being immediately heard from the sound as a whole. So, in remembering a past experience, I do not, normally, discriminate the memory-image from the experience remembered.

Even when the distinction comes to be made in critical reflection, it cannot take the form of a distinction between premiss and conclusion, so as to constitute what we ordinarily call an *inference*. For inference involves the logical transition from one cognition to another cognition. But the kind of mediacy with which we are here dealing is essential to the being of any cognition at all. It does not belong to the development of knowledge. Rather, it is necessary to constitute the germ from which knowledge may develop.

Yet, though we may not call it inference, it would be a far graver error to speak of it as 'instinct' or as 'isolated intuition.' Like inference, it has its ultimate ground in the unity and identity of the Universe, in virtue of which knowledge of a part is partial knowledge of the whole to which it belongs. Each individual at any moment apprehends the universe in its unity from his own limited and peculiar point of view. This point of view is ultimately determined for the individual at any moment by the nature of his immediate experience at that moment. His immediate experience, as it were, radiates from

itself a halo of implications, and in this way primary knowledge is constituted. Such primary knowledge may then mediate further knowledge by way of what we call Inference¹.

Returning to our special problem, I would suggest that the independent not-self is known from the beginning of conscious life, not indeed by inference, but as a direct implication of immediate experience. The case is indeed different from those I have so far considered. I have, so far, referred only to instances in which the immediate experience of the moment points beyond itself to other immediate experiences past, future, or merely possible, of the individual knower; but the independent not-self is other than any actual or possible immediate experience of the individual who knows it. The distinction is undeniable. But I cannot see that it is relevant to the question at issue. The only assignable ground why the immediate experience of the moment points beyond itself is the unity of the universe. It is purely arbitrary to substitute here for the unity of the universe the partial and imperfect unity of the individual. The individual is himself merely a fragment of the universe without any self-contained being. We may therefore assume that from the beginning of his conscious life there must be features of his immediate experience which point beyond themselves to existence other than his own, or than any or all of his immediate experiences.

The opposite view leads to insuperable difficulties. If we start by assuming that the individual is initially confined within the circle of his own immediate experiences, it seems impossible to discover how he could ever get beyond them, so as to know matter or other minds. He could only do so by inference. But all explanation of this kind seems necessarily to involve *petitio principii*. For, though inference yields new knowledge, yet this new knowledge is always a further determination of what we already know indeterminately. In inference we do indeed transcend our data, but only by a continuous develop-

¹ The necessity for this specifying function of purely immediate experience is best seen when we consider the meaning of such words as 'now,' 'here,' and 'this.' How is the meaning of such words determined for thought? Ultimately by immediate experience not as known or thought of, but merely as immediately experienced. The word 'now' applies to an indefinite number of 'nows.' The 'now' referred to, in any particular instance of its use, is determined for us as the moment of actual experience. But it is not determined by the logically prior cognition of such actual experience. For the term 'actual experience' shares the ambiguity of the term 'now.' If we ask what actual experience is referred to, we can only answer 'that which *now* exists,' and are thus involved in a vicious circle. The only possible escape lies in the doctrine that it is not the thought of the actual experience which particularizes the 'now,' but the actual experience itself as it immediately exists.

ment of our data. Thus, if we presuppose that an independent not-self is already known, however vaguely, inference will enable us progressively to define and specify it. But inference cannot yield our primary knowledge of an independent not-self.

On the contrary, we must recognize that, from the outset, there are features of our immediate experience which perpetually point beyond themselves to actual existence, other than our own or than any immediate experiences of ours.

8. POSITIVE ACCOUNT OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDEPENDENT NOT-SELF.

What are these features of immediate experience. Here I must confine myself to a brief indication of my own view without attempting to defend or develop it in detail. I agree with those who find the key to our knowledge of an independent not-self in our awareness of passivity in undergoing sensations, in combination with our awareness of activity in determining what sensations we shall undergo.

Our passivity in having sensations occur to us involves an agent which determines their occurrence. Our activity in getting, keeping, or discontinuing sensations implies that we in our turn act on this agent, so as to determine what sensations it shall generate. Thus, in both ways, coincidentally, we are from the commencement perpetually dealing with an independent not-self, whose activity is, so to speak, the other side of our passivity, and whose passivity is the other side of our activity.

But we must not regard our knowledge of the independent not-self as due to an inference. It cannot be that we start with the premiss, 'I am passively affected,' and from it proceed to the conclusion, 'therefore there is something active in relation to me.' Any attempted explanation of this sort necessarily involves a vicious circle. For we cannot apprehend our passivity without *eo ipso* apprehending something as active in relation to us. Thus the supposed conclusion is already an integral part of its supposed premiss.

There is indeed an element of mediacy in our cognition of the independent not-self. But the mediacy is already contained in our awareness of passivity in undergoing sensations, and of activity in getting them. These cognitions have the complexity which belongs to all cognition. They contain features of immediate experience which, owing to their fragmentary nature, cannot by themselves be distinct objects of knowledge, but can only be known as related to something which is not immediately experienced. And, owing to the

peculiar nature of these immediate experiences, the correlate, which is necessarily known in knowing them, is the independent not-self.

9. OUR KNOWLEDGE OF MATTER.

The independent not-self is not matter. It only furnishes one constituent of the complex unity which we call matter. Matter also essentially includes the qualification of the independent not-self by the content of sense-experience. It follows from the mode in which the not-self is known that it is from the outset so qualified. From the outset, it is known as related in specific ways to sense-experience. In this sense, we may speak of it as 'represented' in terms of sense-experience. And this representative function of actual sensation forms the necessary basis of the ideal construction, or construing, through which our knowledge of the material world develops.

But we must hasten to add that, primarily, there is no explicit distinction between representation and what is represented any more than there is primarily any explicit distinction between our immediate experience in remembering and the experience remembered. Such distinctions only emerge in critical reflection, and they only become fully clear to the philosopher. For primitive consciousness and for our own unreflective consciousness, sense-experience and the correlative agency which conditions it coalesce in one unanalysed total object. They coalesce in such a way that the sense-presentation appears as possessing the independence of the not-self, and the independent not-self seems to be given with the same immediacy as the sense-presentation.

This complex but unanalysed cognition is the germ from which our detailed knowledge of matter develops. To trace this development lies outside my present scope. In dealing with it, we should, in the first place, have to give an account of the distinction of matter into a plurality of distinct things, and of the peculiar nature of that special thing which we call the body of the percipient and its peculiar relation to subjective process,—a relation which leads to the distinction between the self as embodied and its material environment. When this point is reached what follows is, comparatively speaking, an affair of detail.

10. KNOWLEDGE OF MINDS OTHER THAN OUR OWN.

In considering the independent self as qualified in terms of sense-experience, and so forming a constituent of matter, we have not exhausted its nature or our knowledge of it. It must also have an inner being of its own, and this inner being is known to us as more

or less analogous to our own. We know the independent not-self, in the first instance, as the complement and continuation of our own being. Its activity is known as the other side of our passivity, and its passivity as the other side of our activity. Neither its activity nor its passivity have ultimately any meaning for us except as the counterpart of our own immediate experience in doing and undergoing. And whatever knowledge we may attain concerning its inner nature can only be a further development of this primary cognition. So far as we have any insight into its inner being we must apprehend it as another self, or as a partial aspect of another self more or less like our own.

But it is only within a certain region of our experience that this mode of determining the nature of the independent not-self yields definitely verifiable results. It is only in dealing with men, and in a less degree with animals, that this anthropomorphic point of view is found to work in verifiable detail, so as to subserve the development of knowledge and the guidance of conduct. In relatively primitive stages of mental life, we find an indiscriminate anthropomorphism which is gradually restricted and corrected by advancing experience of its futility. But anthropomorphism neither is nor ought to be wholly eliminated. For we must continue to think of actual existences other than our own as having an inner being not exhausted in their relation to us and our sense-experience. And such inner being can only be conceived as psychical. Inner states and processes must, as Lotze maintained, be experienced states and processes.



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